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ABSTRACT

Recent research projects have indicated that a majority of adolescent and adult students have not reached a formal level of cognitive functioning and must therefore be taught rhetorical modes such as comparison and classification. A study was constructed to investigate the cognitive skills development of average college freshmen and to test whether intensive practice would improve summarizing skills. After an informal pretest consisting of multiple choice items, students participated in a three week session that consisted of the following activities: writing paraphrase sentences; summarizing short paragraphs on various subjects; summarizing passages of two to six paragraphs; and summarizing short articles of 300 to 500 words. Two summaries from each student, one written earlier and the other later in the unit, were evaluated for accuracy and brevity. Results showed marked improvement in the students' ability to grasp and reflect adequately the intended meaning of a passage. (Tables and charts are included.) (RAI)

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IF NOT GRAMMAR, WHAT? --

TAKING REMEDIAL WRITING INSTRUCTION SERIOUSLY*

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CS204 163

Definition, process, comparison/contrast, cause/effect, classification, narration, description -- these are the rhetorical types which have been taught for years in college writing and study skills courses. Because many subject matter instructors phrase their essay questions rhetorically ("Compare and contrast World War I and World War II."), it is believed students need to understand the rhetorical types to respond appropriately to the questions. Reading instructors, moreover, stress these types because students will face texts written rhetorically -- paragraphs which define terms, which classify people, and the like. To understand what they read, the students need to know how the material is organized. In short, they are taught how to read or write the rhetorical modes; students are not taught how to compare or to classify. Apparently, since the students are at least 17 or 18 years of age, many teachers assume the students already possess the cognitive skills on which the rhetorical types are based. They can compare, for example, two pictures and explain orally the likenesses and differences. Or, they can take a group of people, put them into categories, and develop a classification scheme. The purpose of this study, however, was to investigate whether average college students do, in fact, possess the cognitive skills undergirding these types. And if they did not possess these skills, could intensive practice improve their performance?

Review of the Research

In searching for previous research on this topic, I reviewed work done in psychology, reading, English, and science education. The work of Piaget, in particular, suggested that college-age students should have mastered the cognitive skills on which the rhetorical types are based. As Piaget has said, the child, when moving from infancy to maturity, seems to progress through four stages - from the sensori-motor and pre-operational to the concrete and the formal level of operations. Oversimplifying, one could probably say a person at the third stage - the concrete - learns a concept or acquires a skill best while actually manipulating concrete objects. For example, to teach the concept of comparison/contrast to students at the concrete level, the teacher would be most effective by asking students to compare two objects which could be handled or examined closely. Instruction of this type is common during the first years of elementary school. However, once students have reached the formal level of operations, they can grasp the concept of comparison in an abstract manner. Instruction at this level, for instance, might be strictly oral (a lecture) without any reference to concrete details. This practice is common, beginning during the junior high school years or earlier. The available research and customary practice in reading and writing instruction implied support for Piaget's notions. In spite of all this evidence, I concluded that many of my average community college students might not have fully arrived at the formal level. In addition, a growing body of research conducted over the last seven years by science educators has shown many young adults have not reached the formal level of operations. Instead, they were operating at the concrete level or at a transitional point somewhere between the concrete and the formal. Representative of these studies are

Campbell (1977), Dunlap and Fazio (1976), Griffiths (1976), and McKinnon and Renner (1971). However, these studies focused on various Piagetian experiments such as conservation of number or volume; that is, they measured whether students could grasp scientific phenomena. None directly investigated the rhetorical modes or types which seemed as fundamental as some of Piaget's tasks.

The Experiment

In order to test this experimental hypothesis, in the spring of 1977 I evaluated a freshman English class at Illinois Central College, a community college located at East Peoria, Illinois. Initially I tried to select volunteer students who were not remedial, who displayed average abilities without reading deficiencies. Most of the students (N=22) possessed the following characteristics:

1. First semester freshmen.
2. Those with ACT (American College Test) English scores of 15 to 17.
3. Those enrolled full-time.

However, as the time for enrollment arrived, additional students were needed to fill the classes; therefore, the criteria were not strictly enforced so enough students were available for the experiment. As a result, four students with lower ACT scores and with part-time schedules ended up in the class.

The Method

During the sixteen-week semester, the class wrote eight papers in the following order: narration, process, comparison/contrast, definition, summary, cause/effect, classification, and problem/solution. For purposes of this

experiment, however, I placed special emphasis on three of the assignments -- comparison/contrast, classification, and summary. Although the results of these assignments are reported elsewhere (Taylor, 1978), I am describing the summary work for two reasons. First, lack of space prevents a discussion of comparison and classification, and second the result of the experiment with summary seems unusual enough to warrant careful attention by teachers of both writing and reading.

In order to summarize in writing, one might hypothesize that students must possess certain subskills like the following:

-- to read.

-- to delineate between main and subordinate ideas.

-- to handle inclusion and exclusion.

-- to find the proper balance between the amount of generalities and specifics.

-- to form a mental Gestalt or to synthesize.

-- to reflect accurately the intended meaning of the passage summarized.

-- to condense and to use the proper amount of specifics and generalities to convey the meaning of the passage.

Unquestionably, students must be able to read before they can be expected to summarize the main idea in writing. Not only must they be familiar with the vocabulary of the material to be read, but also they must be able to comprehend the deep structures. Until they can understand the theme or main idea, they will be unable to determine the important and unimportant ideas of a given passage. In so doing, they must be able to distinquish between main or coordinate and subordinate ideas, between basic concepts and the rhetorical devices like examples

and details which amplify on the main idea. Once they have read the passage and delineated main and subordinate ideas, they must be able to synthesize what they have read, to put all the pieces into some kind of perspective, and finally to pull all the pieces together into a whole. To do so, they must include and exclude certain information, all the time sifting and sorting. At this point, they should have reached the comprehension step: they should now be able to comprehend what they have read. Until this point, however, all of the activity has been internal, a kind of mental reflection of what they have read. Once this receptive stage is complete, they are ready to begin the process of expressing what they have read. As they commence placing words on paper, they must be careful to reflect accurately the intended meaning of the passage and to condense the volume. Closely tied to this step is the ability to find the proper balance between the amount of generalities and specifics used to convey the meaning of the passage. These steps or strategies involved in summarizing are probably incomplete, but they are indicative of the multiple skills required for writing a paper of this kind. Moreover, they include those skills which a student must use before and after taking pen in hand.

As logical and as difficult as these skills may be, ironically textbook writers assume these strategies are intact and deal with them rather superficially. For instance, in an introductory text by Rorabacher (1974), roughly two pages are devoted to writing a summary. If she is representative of most textbook authors, one can probably say they assume students already possess these skills prior to entering a college reading or writing course. To express the same idea in another way, one might say teachers assume students can summarize what they have read orally, or can mentally grasp the significance of what they have read. The problem is teaching them to put their summaries on paper.

The Problem

Unfortunately, I found no research studies concentrating on college students' ability to read expository material and to summarize the main idea in writing. After scanning much of the recent literature on composition, I reviewed what has been done in the study of reading, but once again the findings were limited. Although a great deal of work has been and continues to be done on the nature of reading comprehension, no reported studies would appear to parallel this research study. Nevertheless, many students complain about their difficulty in understanding what they read and recording their ideas on paper. In addition, many teachers (Sherwood, 1977) are concerned about the students' inability to read with comprehension, whatever that general kind of criticism means.

To test whether students could, in fact, summarize, I assembled a series of passages which students were asked to read and to summarize. They were told to summarize the articles in as few a words as possible, but in complete sentences. These exercises were intended not only to determine if students could summarize but also to provide them with practice in doing so. Since their responses were expected to be relatively short -- certainly not more than three or four sentences -- they were receiving practice in summarizing, not in writing papers involving introductions, examples, conclusions, etc. If students had difficulty writing such papers, these exercises seemed to focus on a necessary pre-composing skill. In order to provide relatively easy material of high interest, students were presented with passages from newspapers and popular magazines. Since they were assumed to be deficient in the skill of summary, I intentionally avoided complex material coming from literary sources or textbooks. In the selection of material, I hypothesized that the length of a passage had considerable bearing

on the difficulty of the task; long passages require considerable sifting out of subordinate information, making the creation of a Gestalt more difficult.

Therefore, to begin the instruction, the students were provided with a series of ten single sentences; after reading a given example, the students were asked to choose -- from the three versions given -- another sentence expressing the same idea. After the students worked with these multiple choice problems, they were next supplied with 15 sentences to summarize in their own words. The logic was that writing a one-sentence summary was more difficult than picking from two or three alternatives supplied by the teacher.

For the next set of exercises, the students worked on eight short paragraphs (approximately 50-75 words each), each on a different subject, which they were to summarize as succinctly and accurately as possible. Using the Gunning Readability Formula, I found the exercise articles were written at approximately the 13.5 grade level. I assumed these exercises were more difficult than previous ones (but not by grade level) because they were longer and possible answers were not supplied. However, they were probably easier than later exercises because the students were still working with relatively short passages, reducing the amount of exclusion required and making a Gestalt easier to form.

A perceptive critic might correctly contend that single sentences and paragraphs are really too short to measure the skill of summary. Since they are already so short and condensed, summarizing them is unrealistically difficult. Consequently, I selected a group of 28 longer passages, each containing from two to five or six paragraphs (about 200 words). These passages were also written at approximately the 13.5 grade level. As before, the students gained considerable practice by summarizing these passages as concisely and accurately as possible.

In order to test the students' skills with still longer passages, I in-

cluded six articles, ranging in length from 300 or 500 words each and approximating the 13.5 grade level. Again selected from magazines and newspapers, these articles were judged to be no more difficult to understand than earlier selections, but they were at least twice as long. The rationale was the longer the passage, the more difficult it would be for the student to exclude the least important ideas and to develop a general notion of the main idea.

Results

In order to measure if the students had benefited from the instruction, I analyzed two summaries written by each student -- one early and one near the end of the instruction. This analysis consisted of evaluating the students' ability to convey the meaning of the passage as accurately and as briefly as possible. For a perfect score, the response had to indicate that the students:

1. Accurately reflected the intended meaning of the author.
2. Condensed their responses in the fewest number of words possible, using the proper balance of specifics and generalities.

Once these general criteria were established, I evaluated the two sample passages and determined what I considered the central idea of each passage and what seemed extraneous. For a scoring system, I awarded 3 points maximum for accuracy and 3 points maximum for brevity; for a less than perfect performance, a student was awarded a score of 1 or 2 depending on the quality of the work. Thus, a student could receive a maximum of 6 points on the pre-test and a total of 6 points on the post-test.

Below is Table One, showing the evaluations on the two tests for twelve of the original N group of 22. (For various attrition and attendance pro-

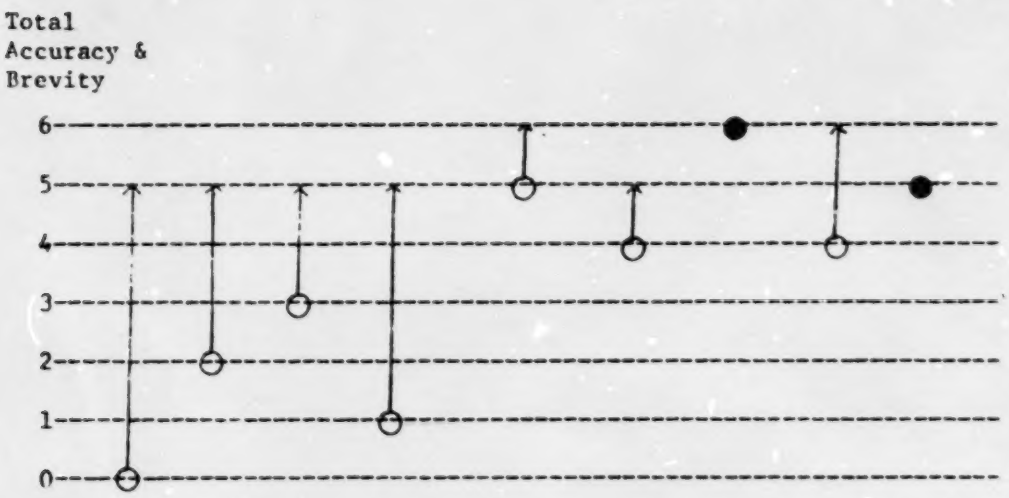
blems, characteristic of the community college, ten students did not complete both the pre- and post-test.) Admittedly the evaluations were subjective, but they perhaps reveal some interesting changes. While only five students out of 12 received a perfect score on the ability to convey the intended meaning accurately on the pre-test, eight out of nine did so on the post-test. Moreover, while only three students out of 12 were able to state their ideas briefly on the pre-test, four out of nine received perfect scores on the post-test. In addition, the mean scores on the pre- and post-tests displayed obvious improvement: 3.3 compared to 4.7. Finally, although all students did not receive perfect scores after the instruction, practically all of them showed improvement in both accuracy and brevity.

Table 1
Comparison of Summaries

	First Passage			Second Passage		
Student	Accuracy	Brevity	Total	Accuracy	Brevity	Total
One	0	1	1	Incomplete		
Two	0	0	0	3	2	5
Three	2	3	5	Incomplete		
Four	2	0	2	3	2	5
Five	3	2	5	3	3	6
Six	1	3	4	2	3	5
Seven	3	3	6	3	3	6
Eight	3	1	4	3	3	6
Nine	3	2	5	3	2	5
Ten	3	0	3	3	2	5
Eleven	2	2	4	Incomplete		
Twelve	0	1	1	3	2	5
	22	18	40	26	22	43
Mean	1.8	1.5	3.3	2.8	2.4	4.7
N=12				N=9		

Perhaps the following diagram illustrates even more graphically the performance of those students taking both the pre- and post-tests. The open circles represent the pre-test scores (the total for accuracy and brevity), and the arrows show the direction and movement according to the post-test scores (accuracy and brevity). The black circles indicate no change. As one can see, those with the lowest skills initially made the greatest gains during the course of the instruction.

Figure 1
Performance Level on Summary



Additional data on the effectiveness of the summary materials and the students' knowledge of this skill come from a questionnaire completed by each member of the class. Half of those responding (N = 12) said they could summarize before the instruction was begun, but all believed they could perform the task better at the end of the assignment than at the beginning. Further, although half of the class felt they could summarize at the beginning of the semester, 11 out of 12 said they had difficulty with the assignment. Moreover,

all said summarizing was a skill they needed and would use in other classes. When asked about the single sentence exercises, all the students felt the exercise was worthwhile. Seven out of 12 found short passages easier to summarize than sentences, but 8 out of 12 believed dealing with several paragraphs harder than single paragraphs. Generally the students felt the number and type of exercises -- sentences, single paragraphs, and articles -- were adequate.

Conclusions

These particular findings appear important. As was earlier hypothesized, apparently the small number of students in this study generally had difficulty at the outset when they were asked to summarize material in their own words. According to the pre-tests, they had trouble with completeness, with including all the important ideas in a passage; however, they had even more difficulty expressing themselves concisely. According to the post-test scores, the students improved a great deal on their ability to reflect accurately the intended meaning, but some were still experiencing problems with conciseness.

A second trial [illegible] the materials during the Fall of 1977 revealed a kind of hierarchy of student responses to the task of summarizing. Much like youngsters writing a short report in elementary school using an encyclopedia, these students originally wanted to copy the whole articles, refusing or failing to put the passage in their own words. This deficiency may have stemmed from a fear of putting down what might be incorrect because it is always more precise to copy word-for-word. Students may have difficulty sifting and sorting through long passages, trying to sift the important from the unimportant. If they are unable to make this distinction, no doubt forming a Gestalt of the article is difficult or impossible. Next, as they

gained more experience with summarizing, the students used more of their own words and fewer from the original. Only gradually were they able to rid themselves of the tendency to quote directly from the passages given them to summarize. However, until they overcame this tendency to use the author's words, the students were unable to compress their responses in the most efficient manner.

Limitations

Future researchers should pay particular attention to the limitations of this experiment for they will suggest ways in which more confidence can be placed in the obvious and numerous limitations of this study.

1. Care must be taken to select control and experimental groups which fall within the parameters suggested earlier but impossible to follow in this study.

2. The results of this experiment may have been biased by the varied ability of the subjects as well as the small number of subjects involved.

3. The tools for assessing student progress were not particularly very accurate or conclusive.

4. Future researchers should attempt to measure the transfer of skills - from knowing how to summarize orally, for example, to knowing how to summarize in writing.

5. More sophisticated exercises need to be developed for assessing the student's ability to summarize. For instance, the selections used

in the experiment, drawn primarily from newspapers and magazines, are surely not representative of the materials which students are likely to encounter at the college level.

Implications

The implications of these findings are noteworthy. Apparently, if the students in this study are representative, the skill of summarizing is far from proficient in many average college-age students. In fact, an exhaustive study of summarizing skills would seem extremely important because they are so central to academic learning and because apparently little research has been done in this area. In future research, researchers should assess students using selections from textbooks as well as narrative or literary pieces. If this skill is not taught as an integral part of any subject-matter course, I suspect few students will be able to express their ideas of what they have read with much accuracy or conciseness. Yet, as this experiment has shown, students can improve on this skill after practicing on passages from one to several paragraphs in length.

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